DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 030 CS 201 016

AUTHOR Lloyd-Jones, Richard
TITLE Thoughtful Conversation in the Classroom.
PUB DATE Nov 73
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (63rd, Philadelphia, November 22-24, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); Curriculum Development; English Departments; *English Instruction; Literature Programs; Teaching Methods; *Team Teaching; *Team Training; *Undergraduate Study

ABSTRACT

If effectively organized and executed, team taught courses provide students and teachers alike with unique opportunities for involvement and feedback in the classroom. Students do not just get feedback from one instructor, but rather are evaluated by several staff members, resulting in a more accurate evaluation of student work. Team teaching situations also provide greater stimulation for the teachers by increasing their opportunities to interact with one another. Not every person can be teamed with every other person, but a little care allows for the creation of diverse but harmonious teams. (LL)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED 087030

Thoughtful Conversation in the Classroom

Richard Lloyd-Jones

A few weeks ago when we were polling our undergraduates about their reactions to our program, we asked how they felt about team-taught courses. A couple of students responded that it was a trick designed to cut the instructor's work load in half. I showed the answer to one of our faculty members who has taught often and well in our team-teaching program and he observed that he would have thought that it was a trick of the administration to get twice as much work out of any faculty member.

This seems analogous to the traditional stories about lecture and discussion courses. I raise the analogy because it is part of the general problem. You may hear a teacher say, "When I am energetic, lively, full of my topic, and alert to possibilities I lead a discussion; when I'm tired or ill-prepared, I lecture." Yet you may hear a student say, "I don't want to waste my time on discussion courses, it's all bull, and I want to get something solid."

Clearly the image of what is being done varies with the point of view. The good discussion leader uses the alternative interpretations of the participants and dialectic to teach method and enlarge the vision. Furthermore, he is always conscious of what the class needs to have explained. But also there is more than one image of what a team-taught course is. The first team-taught course I met was a science course in which specialists from various areas came to lecture on their specialities. Although in theory they were open to questioning, in practice they were not. They gave their half or third of the course and remained remote. So far as we knew, the instructors never talked to each other. One rarely built on an insight introduced by another. The course remained three separate course-lets

CS 201 016

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Richard Lloyd-Jones

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

packaged as one. Since the students rarely conversed, even having the same students in class didn't help much. Even worse was a weekly "seminar" in which a different lecturer appeared each week. A teaching assistant took roll and a faculty big shot introduced the speaker, who was to "open the possibilities of his special field." The theory in both of these examples is that specialists are needed to present even elementary accounts of special knowledge.

The contrary example, which represents my implicit thesis, I met in a European literature class conducted by Prof. Joseph E. Baker. There two or three instructors from different departments met with a small group of honor students to discuss books. Although each instructor represented a special knowledge and point of view, none was above questioning. Although occasionally one might make a ten-minute statement or offer a bibliography, students and teachers alike sat around the table examining the text. Experience and insight was gathered wherever one could. People--experienced and inexperienced--shared their efforts to get at the essence of a work of literature or philosophy. That sharing, that conversation, depends on the assumption that dialectic is useful, and that rhetoric employed in conversation is a means to the discovery of truth. That is, multiple points of viewing are essential to truth in the humanities.

Having made this general statement, I now would like to make relatively explicit the system of assumptions one makes in supporting this kind of team-teaching. Then, since the topic is really not susceptible to proof and since statistical surveys seem a little beside the point, I would like to illustrate the practical problems of team-teaching primarily from the experience of my own department at the University of Iowa.

Some of my assumptions are merely stipulated definitions. For example, I assume that we are talking about teams which are truly units, not merely

sequences of separate instructors. Constant team planning and adjusting and interacting is required so that the course really exists as a unit. All of the teachers are always present. But there are other more fundamental assumptions. For example, teaching requires more than just conveying information, although, of course, it includes conveying information. It also includes the illustrating of processes and the creating of experiences. That description of teaching applies far more generally than to team-taught courses or even discussion courses, but it suggests the importance of interaction.

Interaction requires awareness of point of view. We talk about point of view as a literary-critical term. We emphasize, for example, how the choice of narrator for a story affects the particular realities which are exhibited in a story. But sometimes we forget in the classroom that point of view is more than just a technical device of storytellers--or even rhetoricians. It implies the complexity of truth as a humanist tries to see it. He distrusts any factor isolated and is much more inclined to talk of multi-factoral situations full of intertwined variables. He talks of literature as a "synthetic" field which draws upon and blends inextricably all kinds of human knowledge. He says it thus exceeds the capacity of one individual to sort it out. Having said all that, he implies that different individuals approach a particular literary truth quite differently and can say very useful things which can help those at other angles of vision understand the totality of a literary experience. Final truths are not in the hands of any humans, even teachers, and perhaps the real value is in approaching the problem, not in thinking you've got the answer. Such an assumption is at the heart of the discussion course, for it presumes that even the inexperienced reader will have some knowledge, some angle

of perception, that can enlighten some part of a literary text. It does not imply that all of the discussants are equally informed or equally skilled, but it suggests that even the naive observation may have value to the sophisticated person, at least in providing a kind of perspective. It admits that for a community to exist each person must be able to contribute something of himself. If a discussion has been well conducted, one hopes that the group's view of the text is larger and more comprehensive and more stimulating than the view which could have been presented by any individual.

But the justification has a more narrow pedagogical basis too. If we agree that learning in the humanities is not clearly sequential, that students in a class are not equally prepared in all aspects of the course, then instructors need ample opportunity to find where the students are. Lecturers are always a victim of their preconceptions. They can hope for questions from the audience, and they can read papers which may or may not reveal the problems of the class, but there is considerable lag between what they find to be the misunderstanding of the student and their ability to respond to the problem.

In a good discussion dialectic is a basic game, so a class seeks definition of its understandings and feelings about a text. The instructor in listening to the discussion can note what students have observed and failed to observe and can then frame questions to force more precise definitions. But, of course, students aren't the only ones who need to have their concepts defined. All of us who teach or give papers know that there will be questions posed by our auditors which will help us define our own thoughts. In these exchanges we learn, even when we speak with complete assurance.

Sometimes, though, extremely naive people are not even able to frame the right kind of question with which to challenge the instructor. In a team-taught conversation the second or third instructor poses questions that help the day's leader define what is to happen next. There is, of course, always a danger that two or three teachers will carry on their own discussion and all the students will become merely observers. But so long as the instructors remember their proper role is to include the range of experience from the class, they will simply help to tighten and direct. They can better observe and diagnose problems when they don't always have to concentrate on the next question. When a student gets on a good idea that he can't quite handle, one of the instructors may become his second in pursuing the topic. If the instructors themselves are truly representative, the students have more evident options for someone to emulate, and they can see that professional differences of opinion need not be hostile. In fact, some students have claimed that experiencing academic argument is the most valuable part of team-teaching.

Perhaps these assumptions are enough for starters, and I should get on to some of the practical applications. Professor Baker's program at Iowa had a long history, but it was really the stimulus of the NDEA Institutes that set off our department on the heavy use of team-taught courses. We felt that the Iowa Institutes had been unusually effective in melding strangers from all over the country into groups exploring new ideas. To be sure, the participants in the institutes were all well qualified teachers. They were not exactly naive readers. On the other hand, they were isolated strangers with lots of ego invested in their professional status. We observed that when a team of four to seven instructors encouraged them to pool their experience, we had a real happening.

Learning went on at a level beyond what any of us had imagined possible. John Gerber then challenged us to take what we were doing well in the institutes over into our regular program.

To answer the challenge we created a twelve-semester-hour course that occupied a student's entire attention for a semester. I'll come back to that in detail as an extreme example of my case, but I'll point out in passing that our satisfaction with the results has led two-thirds of our regular faculty to engage in team-teaching at one time or another. We've taught in tandem period courses like Romanticism or Medieval Studies. We have introduced speciality areas like Oral Literature or Film and Literature. We have taught basic professional courses like the Introduction to Graduate Study or the various seminars in teaching literature or writing in college. We have team-taught writing in various forms. In fact, almost everything we offer has one time or another turned up with team instruction, and probably with double or triple credit in time commitments.

The common features in all of these efforts are that all the instructors are always present and the main thrust of the course involves discussion and performance by students and teachers alike. Each course requires careful planning, because the instructors must get their signals straight before they go to class. That reduces the temptation to ad-lib through a semester. The objectives may not be stated in behavioral form, but at least the objectives are made explicit in some way and usually the way includes publication before registration. Especially in large credit courses it is important that students know exactly what they are committing themselves to. It is almost impossible to drop a twelve-hour course without also dropping out of school. Therefore, even without prodding from advocates of accountability, the team-taught courses are likely to announce their objectives and the exact means for reaching the objectives before registration.

The instructors try to maintain an attitude toward students that might be analogous to how full professors treat junior colleages--that is the image often cited--even though the relationship may be tainted a bit by the need for grades and credit. On the other hand, junior colleagues are aware that promotion and salary often depend on their seniors, so maybe the analogy isn't so far off. The point is that with several instructors it is easier to avoid the image of the single star, a contingency is possible.

From this general statement let me focus on my extreme example, the Literature Semester. Briefly, the Literature Semester is one of four twelve-semester-hour courses taught by three instructors to a maximum of thirty students. They meet two hours a day five days a week. There is a basic reading list scheduled throughout the semester so that the sessions are almost always spent focusing on a particular text. Usually this means a discussion lead by one of the three instructors but open to participation by all. Ordinarily at the beginning of the semester until people get used to the separate personalities, the second and third instructors at any hour participate little. That is, the students must become accustomed to doing their own talking, and each instructor needs to get his own classroom voice established. Otherwise, a person who leads by indirection won't have a chance to get started before more direct people take over. Anyway, two observers are needed to define the roles adopted by the students of the class. Some sessions are devoted to play cuttings. Sometimes the class subdivides itself into groups of ten and has small committee discussions, which are resolved then into the larger group. In short, the instructors try to vary the format enough so that the class is not always predictable, but they also try to operate enough within a pattern that a student can predict his work load.

Ordinarily, the first three or four weeks of the semester are a shakedown period in which the students acquire a common experience and a common vocabulary. They become personally acquainted, often in a party of some sort and always with incidental opportunities for discussion in a social context. Frequently this process culminates at the end of four or five weeks in various frustrations and tensions. For one thing, most undergraduates have not had such a concentrated exposure to any one discipline, and they find it intimidating. It is almost routine to expect that somewhere between the fourth and sixth week there will have to be a session for clearing the air as the students express their feelings about how they are being abused. At that point the class moves to its second phase, one which seems to be the headlong examination of a rather wide variety of literary texts. It ordinarily lasts until the twelfth or thirteenth week, by which time most of the students become overwhelmed by their own ignorance. At this point they are less likely to blame the instructors for their difficulty than themselves, but they are equally in need of sympathetic counsel and hearing from the staff.

The point of my describing these emotional peaks is to indicate that this sort of team-teaching is not a simple rational exposition of literature. It is clearly an emotional experience in which you take advantage of the feelings aroused by literature and by social contact to stimulate a greater commitment to exacting reading. We don't want to discourage either feelings or ideas or fun, but neither do we wish to encourage vagueness in emotion or intellect. Nor do we want to separate emotion and intellect. A corollary of this concern is that most of the faculty members find themselves knowing more about their students than they really had in mind to find out.

They become personal counselors as well as academic counselors, and that is a terrible temptation to some frustrated clergymen or psychoanalysts. Clearly it is legitimate to be a sympathetic adult; it is illegitimate to push beyond one's competence. Conversation can be allowed to disintegrate into group therapy, but keeping one's eye on the text helps provide a balance between exploring one's feelings and exploring the world of feelings and ideas. I suggest that that risk is worth taking. At least it avoids that temptation in some universities of treating the personal lives of the students as beyond the interest of any faculty members. Perhaps that accounts for some of the disillusionment in higher learning expressed by young people.

The four versions of the Iowa Literature Semester deal with traditional English literature, American and contemporary literature, the literatures of Western Europe, and the literatures of Asia. Again, let me focus on one for the sake of explanation. In the English literature course we select fiction, non-fiction, poetry and drama written generally between 1350 and 1850. We do not try to make any grand historical survey, but inevitably some kind of historical conception emerges. Everyman finds a place against both Pilgrim's Progress and School for Scandal. Faerie Queene is set against Paradise Lost and Tom Jones. Chaucer's tales may be seen in the context of Dickens' novels. The total immersion in a literature permits one to set up all sorts of critical contrasts. Genre theory and social and literary history alike come naturally into the discussion.

My main point here, however, is not the subject of the conversation so much as the fact of conversation. To be sure, the subject requires thought; it is not just a celebration of "self." It is disciplined by

common purpose--a purpose implicit in humanistic study. But the question is why we should assign so much effort to the task of intellectual conversation. Why should more than one faculty member be present?

In a large university creating a community is difficult. The nature of the institution encourages specialists; silence is imposed on those who are less than expert. Changing patterns of mass registration make individuals take classes with strangers and remain strangers. Even a good discussion leader in three hours a week has difficulties in creating an intellectual community, and major shared experiences of literature are rare. The student-consumer expects the teacher-producer to deliver ideas; the ideas are noted and memorized; even when the course is designated for discussion the habits of the market place discourage active inquiry. There is no one to challenge the expert, and the expert is expected to be so refined in his presentation that there is no time to observe student reactions. Into this highly "efficient" program conversation introduces a kind of intellectual static.

Teams of instructors, especially when given larger than usual blocks of student time, can concentrate on creating an intellectual community which ~~creates~~ establishes its own constraints. The constraints are a product of a society, of personal commitment to the group. That period from the fifth to the twelfth week which I described represents a time during which the class operates on its internally created sanctions for participation and cooperation. By that time the instructors have demonstrated how to differ. (We avoid having teams repeat themselves as teams so each semester the adjustment problem among the staff is solved anew in front of the students.) Members kid each other, top each other's jokes, and generally spend time and effort in creating a social situation. The team then honors its own expertise but it

also creates a model in which the non-expert has obligations to contribute, and in that active contribution all--teachers and students--learn with the firmness which grows out of performance rather than passive acceptance. In a modest way the effect for students is similar to that for faculty members who are obliged to publish, to present their ideas before their peers. Performance forces one to clear up sentimental vagueness, but performance in a conversational situation is supported by questioning friends rather than threatened by grades and classified by a certification machine.

I can wax enthusiastic, but the real test of whether the commitment of resources is worth the price--and it does cost in time and spirit--depends on achievement and testimony of participants.

About 80% of the students have been generally pleased or wildly enthusiastic about the experience. Regularly administered opinionnaires have indicated at the end of such classes that students are weary but happy. They continue to register for courses together, sit together in other classes, keep track of each other when they leave school, write back or call to tell how they liked the class. The 20% or so who consider the courses ordinary or worse often turn out not really to have had the vocation. Some simply prefer lectures. A number of students on the verge of dropping out have tried the team courses as a last resort, and they often have not helped. But overall the rate of displeasure is quite low.

Among the faculty there seems to be an unwritten rule that team teaching is a once a year activity--satisfying but time consuming. Most people in English like literary conversations. Although there is some satisfaction in orchestrating a good solo class, still even faculty members sometimes have trouble finding the intellectual community and welcome the chance to discuss literature with students and colleagues; they renew their own

general enthusiasm for texts perhaps long un-read. To be sure, not every person can be teamed with any other person, but a little care allows the creation of diverse but harmonious teams. Then the team members delight in the stimulus of each other, and their delight is contagious. But it must be admitted that very insecure faculty members have a hard time living in a world of conversation. They don't respect themselves enough to respect others.

By now it should be clear that I am arguing for a kind of academic presence in the departmental offering which is different from Socratic questioning with its bullying irony, different from oratorical or dramatic performance, and different from group therapy. It is the thoughtful conversation which takes place in the best moments of academic community. One teacher may do it alone, but several teachers, each thinking, are more likely to be able to prevail against the strong pressures of current practice.